

Basso Building  
7338 Woodward Avenue  
Detroit  
Wayne County  
Michigan

HABS No. MI-274

HABS  
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82-DETRO  
19-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
MID-ATLANTIC REGION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BASSO BUILDING (Commercial Building) HABS No. MI-274

Location: 7338 Woodward Avenue  
Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan  
USGS Detroit, Michigan, Quadrangle  
UTM Coordinates: 17.329262.4692840

Date of  
Construction: 1915, with addition in 1921

Present Owner: Uptown Land Development Company

Present Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: None

Significance: This is a significant example of the kind of speculative commercial construction commonplace in Detroit during the city's period of rapid growth brought about by the success of the automobile industry in the late 1910s and early 1920s. It was built to provide office space in the rapidly-expanding New Center area in mid-town Detroit. It is also an outstanding example of neo-classical design, with elaborate Beaux-Arts ornamentation.

Project  
Information: This documentation was undertaken in September, 1986, in accordance with the memorandum of Agreement between the Uptown Land Development Company, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation as a mitigative measure prior to the demolition of the building.

Dr. Charles K. Hyde  
Associate Professor of History  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan 48202

## PART I - HISTORY OF THE BASSO BUILDING

The first construction on Woodward Avenue north of the Grand Boulevard took place in the mid-1880's, when Detroit had a population of less than 200,000, with virtually no development more than two miles from the Detroit River.<sup>1</sup> The parcel on which the Basso Building was later constructed was part of Lot 57 in the Ten Thousand Acre Tract, a quarter section of 160 acres originally granted to Augustus B. Woodward by the Governor of the Michigan Territory in 1822. In a series of conveyances in 1871 and 1872, the land passed to the Bagg family. In 1882, the Bagg family and Joseph Horton, who owned the adjacent parcel to the north, jointly gave up for public use a sixty-foot wide strip to be used for a public highway, which became Horton Avenue.<sup>2</sup>

The area east of Woodward Avenue, between Grand Boulevard and Horton Avenue, was platted in 1884, with the southern half named the Atkinson Subdivision and the northern half Bagg's Subdivision. The property where the Basso Building was eventually built included a large brick residence as early as 1885, at a time when there were no other buildings along this stretch of Woodward Avenue.<sup>3</sup> Albert W. Bagg, identified as the manager of the Safety Pole Tip Company, owned the property and occupied the house until 1890, when John McLean, a prominent Detroit cigar manufacturer, acquired the property. After his death in 1907, his widow, Sarah McLean, remained there until 1913.<sup>4</sup> This large brick residence, which was set back some sixty feet from Woodward Avenue, remained unchanged throughout this time.<sup>5</sup> The Gerard Stormfeltz Loveley Company acquired the property in 1911, sold it to the Klatt Land Company in March 1915, and Klatt in turn transferred the property to Michael, Victor, and Albert Basao a few days later for \$42,500.<sup>6</sup> The house that had stood on the property since 1885 was probably demolished in 1913.<sup>7</sup>

The Basso brothers erected this general-use, speculative office building in 1915 and 1921. At the time, Woodward Avenue was Detroit's major commercial spine, but this location was three and one-half miles from the Detroit River and the downtown commercial district. As Detroit boomed in the early twentieth century and the existing Central Business District became increasingly congested, architects and real estate developers hoped to build a separate new office and commercial district distant from downtown. Real estate at and near the intersection of Woodward Avenue and Grand Boulevard was developed as Detroit's "New Center" area in the late 1910's and 1920's. The first major building in this area was the Ford Motor Company Service Building (the Boulevard Building),

erected at the northeast corner of Woodward Avenue and East Grand Boulevard. This substantial eight-story office building, designed by Albert Kahn, was constructed in two stages, with the first four stories built in 1909 and the remaining four in 1913. The massive General Motors Building, also an Albert Kahn design, opened in 1922, but had been planned for more than three years. The last major project in the New Center area in the 1920's was the Fisher Building, another Albert Kahn project, completed in 1928.<sup>8</sup>

The construction of the first portion of the Basso Building in 1915 was closely linked to the history of the Regent Theater project on an adjacent parcel. Shortly after the Klatt Land Company acquired two parcels of land south of Horton and east of Woodward, a group of investors established the Regent Theater Company and in June, 1913, announced the construction of an elaborate theater and entertainment complex. They planned a three story building fronting on Woodward Avenue which would incorporate a large dance hall on the third floor, office space on the second floor, and shops on the first, with a large, two story theater, with a capacity of 3,000 seats, located to the rear. The prodigious Detroit theater architect C. Howard Crane, was to design the complex. The Regent Theater Company, with William F. Klatt on the Board of Directors, planned to complete construction in six months, and offered \$100,000 in common stock to the public, at \$10 per share, to cover all expenses.<sup>9</sup>

The original plans were greatly modified, probably because of problems selling the original stock offering. Instead, the Klatt Land Company sold one parcel of land with frontage of 80 feet on Woodward Avenue and a depth of 65 feet to the Basso Brothers in March 1915 for \$42,500, and a larger parcel to the Regent Theater Company of Detroit for \$500,000.<sup>10</sup> The Regent Theater, with two floors, and a capacity of 3,600, was built on the site in 1916, designed by the architects William B. Stratton & VonSchneider. The theater entrance, on Woodward, occupied the empty space that now exists between the Basso Building and the Ford Service Building. The entrance, 28 feet wide and 70 feet long, extended to the theater proper, measuring 108 feet wide and 150 long. The Regent Theater, renamed the Center Theater in 1961, remained open until the mid-1970's.<sup>11</sup>

The Basso Brothers - Michael, Victor, and Albert - were not long-time Detroit residents when they bought this land. The first listing of any of the brothers in the Detroit City Directory was in 1907, when Michael appeared, listed as a "confectioner." He was listed as working for a confectioner, L. Schiappaccase & Company, beginning in 1912, and eventually

became the manager of the firm by 1920. The 1921 City Directory lists him as Vice President of the Detroit United Fruit Auction Company.<sup>12</sup> He was shown as the owner of record on the building permit issued on 2 July 1915, for a brick and concrete structure with an estimated cost of \$20,000.<sup>13</sup> The name, "Basso Building," may have been used from the start, but the first printed reference appeared on a 1918 real estate atlas.<sup>14</sup> After the building was greatly enlarged in 1921-1922, Michael Basso established a building management office on the third floor, with the first reference, "Michael Basso, Manager and Fruit Broker," in the 1924/25 City Directory. The remaining Basso brothers, Albert and Victor, do not appear in the City Directory until 1925/26, because they had probably not yet come to Detroit. Then, in the 1928/29 City Directory, all three brothers appear as "Basso Brothers, Real Estate, 307 Basso Building." They maintained their building management and real estate offices, with various name changes, at Room 307 Basso Building, until 1974.<sup>15</sup>

The original building (architect unknown) was a two story structure with four shops on the first floor and offices on the second. The shops all had tenants from 1916 onwards, with a good deal of continuity during the first ten years. The "Regent Sweet Shop" occupied the space next to the Regent Theater beginning in 1917, while a men's furnishings shop, a jeweler, and a drug store occupied the remaining spaces.<sup>16</sup>

The most significant alteration made to the building was the addition (architect unknown) of five stories in 1921-1922, giving the building its current configuration of seven stories.<sup>17</sup> Metal lath office partitions installed in 1923 are almost certainly the ones still extant at this writing.<sup>18</sup> The building remained essentially unchanged until 1949, when several alterations were made to the Woodward Avenue and Horton Avenue facades. When a real estate appraisal of the property was completed in April, 1947, several snapshots attached to the report show that the building looked the same as it had appeared in a photograph taken in 1925.<sup>19</sup>

In December 1948, the Basso Building, Inc. took out a building permit to "repair marquise and loose materials in front of building," with estimated costs of \$1,000. However, in January, 1949, the firm took out a new permit which allowed them to remove the marquise instead. Then, in July, the City of Detroit issued Victor J. Basso a permit to "remodel facade of building," with an estimated cost of \$12,000.<sup>20</sup> The work completed in 1949 included removing the round orbs atop the balustrade pedestals; replacing the original molded spiral columns featuring Corinthian capitals which separated the individual windows in each bay on the seventh floor with narrow

terra cotta mullions; removing the metal marquise which extended the entire length of the Woodward Avenue facade; and adding sheet metal panels and a new "Basso Building" sign on the first floor.

The Basso Building served as a general office building until Basso Building, Inc., sold it to The Shaw College at Detroit, Inc., in April 1976. Shaw College at Detroit, which owned another building on the other side of Woodward Avenue, used the Basso Building for administrative offices and student services. After Shaw College went bankrupt, the property passed to Amvest, Inc., and then to Uptown Land Development Company in June, 1985.<sup>21</sup>

## PART II - DESCRIPTION OF THE BASSO BUILDING

Located at the southeast corner of Woodward and Horton, the Basso Building is a rectangular, seven-story structure of classic symmetry and proportions, with extensive Beaux-Arts ornamentation. The two principle facades, along Woodward and Horton, are sheathed in white glazed terra cotta blocks, while the building's shields, medallions, moldings, lettering, and other decorative elements appear in green, gold, blue, and red terra cotta. This is a steel-framed building resting on a reinforced concrete foundation.

Both of the two main facades are divided vertically into four bays that are set apart by thick shafts. On the Woodward Avenue side, which measures eighty feet in length, each bay contains four windows that are separated by narrow mullions. The second story mullions are more narrow than the rest. The Horton Avenue facade, which is sixty feet long, is identical to the Woodward Avenue facade, except that it has only three windows per bay. The ground floor has multiple doors and large display windows, now boarded up. The six remaining floors have ordinary, double-paned sash windows.

The classical quality of the Basso Building is apparent in the column-like organization of the structure: the first and second floors (the original 1915 building) function as a base or pedestal; floors three through six as a shaft; and the seventh story and roof section as a cornice.

The first floor is sheathed in sheet metal panels and is separated from the second level by a ledge. Geometric tooled designs in the shapes of triangles, hexagons, and diamonds predominate throughout the second story facade on the column shafts and in the panel area between the top of the second story windows and a course of dentils. In the panel area, crosses appear over each window mullion, while crosses overlaid with medallions are located at the intersection of the shafts.

Floors three through six make up the building's body or shaft. Each floor is separated from the next by a wide horizontal band that tends to counteract the vertical lines of the structure. Letters spelling "BASSO BUILDING" are centered on the Woodward Avenue facade between the fifth and sixth floors. The top of the sixth floor, which contains moldings and other decorative elements, serves as a "capital" of the shaft section. It contains, from bottom to top, a plain bead molding; a "neck" with gold floral moldings above each window mullion and a circular disk medallion with a red inner core above each column shaft; a course of egg-and-dart; and an "abacus" formed by the protruding ledge.

The space from the seventh floor to the roof line forms the entablature of the Basso Building. An architrave and frieze extend from the window sill of the seventh floor to the cornice line. The seventh story window section appears almost as a balcony since the windows are recessed from the outer wall and because an iron grating rests before each window. There are two styles of floral-patterned iron grates, one with a circular center and the other with a square center. An arcade, which springs from the shafts and mullions, appears over the seventh floor windows. The arcade, with a single arch per window, is surrounded at the top by a green-colored floral band. The area above the arcade contains square terra cotta blocks, laid out like diamonds, with smaller, red-colored blocks embedded at each intersection. Ornaments also appear in this frieze area: floral-bordered yellow shields over each column; circular, green-colored floral medallions over the mullions; and elaborate, white, floral-bordered shields, crossed diagonally by yellow banners, located on the three corners of the Woodward and Horton Avenue facades.

The cornice of the building begins with a bed molding, followed by a green floral molding, a line of dentils, and a red band of egg-and-dart. The soffit of the cornice is divided into dark-blue recessed panels, each with a single gold-colored flower in relief. The corona is supported by a series of scrolled brackets, or modillions. A red floral medallion appears on the surface facing of each bracket. The cornice concludes in a cyma recta crown.

The ornamental treatment of the Basso Building continues above the cornice. Barely visible from the ground, Roman-style, semi-circular tiles are surmounted by a balustrade that extends over the entire length of the Horton and Woodward Avenue facades. The balustrade consists of double-bellied balusters. Every fourth baluster, in line with the window mullions, is an uncut, rectangular baluster. The balustrade is also broken into pedestals in line with the main columns.

The back and southern facades consist of plain, unadorned, and dark-colored brick. Fenestration is minimal on the southern facade, while the rear of the building is covered with numerous windows and a fire escape. In order to reduce the abrupt contrast between the Horton facade of white terra cotta and the dark brick facade of the rear of the building, some terra cotta elements are continued on the rear facade. A narrow strip of terra cotta work is wrapped around the northeast corner of the building to create the appearance of quoining. Two narrow bands of terra cotta tiles with unadorned molding form the cornice, while the seventh story window ledge on the Horton facade continues as a narrow, flat strip of terra cotta tiles.



The basement contains two coal-fired U.S. Radiator Capital boilers equipped with iron fireman automatic stokers, an adjoining coal bin, and a water heating system with a 500 gallon storage tank. The ground floor consists of three large shops, each with wooden floors covered with tiles, plastered walls, and drop ceilings of early 1960s vintage. The entrance corridor leading to the stairwell and a pair of Otis elevators has a tile floor, marble wainscoting, and an arched plastered ceiling. The remaining floors have identical floorplans, with a U-shaped main corridor allowing direct access to large offices; a subsidiary reception area leading to four smaller, private offices facing Woodward Avenue; and restroom facilities, with men's rooms on the even-numbered floor and ladies' rooms on the odd-numbered ones. The men's rooms appear to have the original fixtures, while the ladies' rooms have formica vanities installed in the 1960s. All of the offices had outside windows and appear to enjoy considerable natural light. The floor-to-ceiling partitions that border the main corridor have extensive frosted glass segments to permit the diffusion of light. These partitions appear to be the ones installed in 1923, although there are some other partitions dating from the 1970s. All seven stories have twelve-foot ceilings, even though the seventh floor appears to be much taller from outside the building.

<sup>1</sup>Sidney Glazer, Detroit: A Study in Urban Development (New York, 1965), pp. 129-130.

<sup>2</sup>City of Detroit, Tract Books, Deed of 5 August 1822, Liber 8, page 432; Warranty Deed, 11 February 1871, Liber 149, page 509 and Quit Claim Deed, 16 April 1872, Liber 155, Page 354; and Dedication for Highway Purposes (Deeds), 18 August 1882, Liber 239, page 284.

<sup>3</sup>Eugene Robinson, Atlas of the City of Detroit and Suburbs (New York, 1885).

<sup>4</sup>Ralph L. Polk and Company, Detroit City Directory (Detroit, 1884-1914), passim and City of Detroit, Land Tract Index, Book No. 1012, Liber 264, 278, and 236, Plat of Bagg's Subdivision.

<sup>5</sup>Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, Insurance Maps of Detroit, Michigan (New York, 1897 and 1910).

<sup>6</sup>City of Detroit, Land Tract Index, Book No. 1012, Liber 753 (21 February 1911), Liber 980 (23 March 1915) and Liber 984 (27 March 1915).

<sup>7</sup>The City Directories for 1914 and 1915 show no buildings at this location. Vacant buildings were usually listed as such.

<sup>8</sup>W. Hawkins Ferry, The Buildings of Detroit: A History (Detroit, 1968), pp. 187, 215, 334-335.

<sup>9</sup>Detroit Saturday Night Live, 14 June 1913, n.p.

<sup>10</sup>City of Detroit, Land Tract Index, Book No. 1012, Liber 984, pp. 468, 469.

<sup>11</sup>City of Detroit, Building Permits Microfilm and Index, Permit No. 9663, issued 23 August 1915 and Andrew Craig Morrison, Opera House, Nickel Show, and Palace: An Illustrated History of Theater Buildings in the Detroit Area (Dearborn, Michigan: Henry Ford Museum, 1974), n.p.

<sup>12</sup>Polk, Detroit City Directory (Detroit, 1900-1924/25), passim.

<sup>13</sup>City of Detroit, Building Permits Microfilm and Index, Permit No. 8707, issued 2 July 1915.

14George William Baist, Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Detroit, Michigan (Philadelphia, 1918).

15Ralph L. Polk and Company, Detroit City Directory (Detroit, 1924-1974), passim.

16Ibid., 1916-1925.

17City of Detroit, Building Permits Microfilm and Index, Permit No. 10858 A, issued 6 December 1921.

18Ibid., Permit No. 4560 A, issued 21 August 1923.

19George W. Drennan Company, "Real Estate Appraisal of the Basso Building, 7338 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, Michigan, for Franklin C. Forsythe, Attorney, Estate of Albert Basso, Deceased," Ann Arbor, Michigan, 21 April 1947.

20Ibid., Permit No. 32950, issued 3 December 1948; Permit No. 34217, issued 11 January 1949; and Permit No. 48995, issued 15 July 1949.

21City of Detroit, Land Tract Index, Book No. 1012, Liber 22449 (1 April 1976 and 5 June 1985) and Liber 22455 (7 June 1985).

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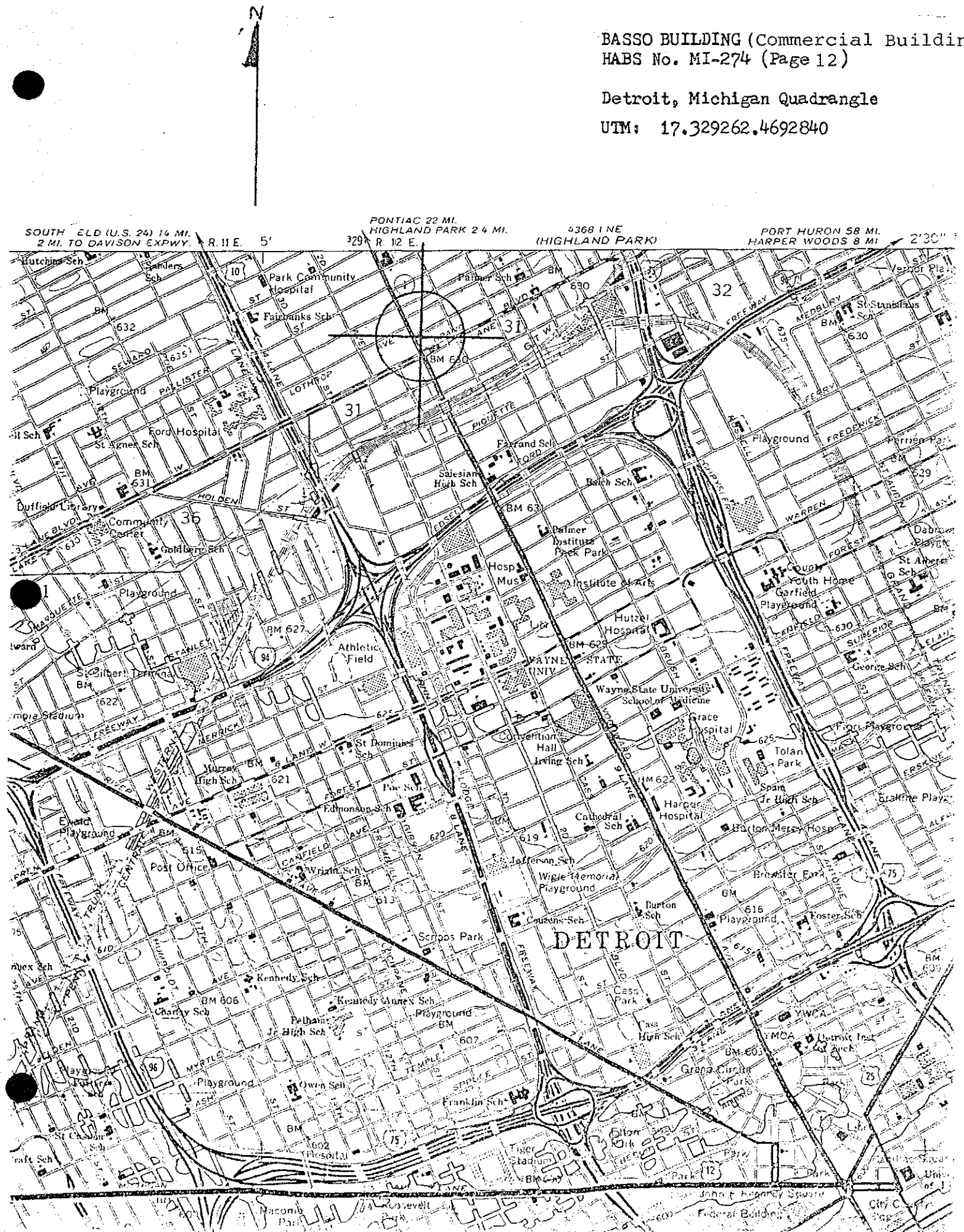
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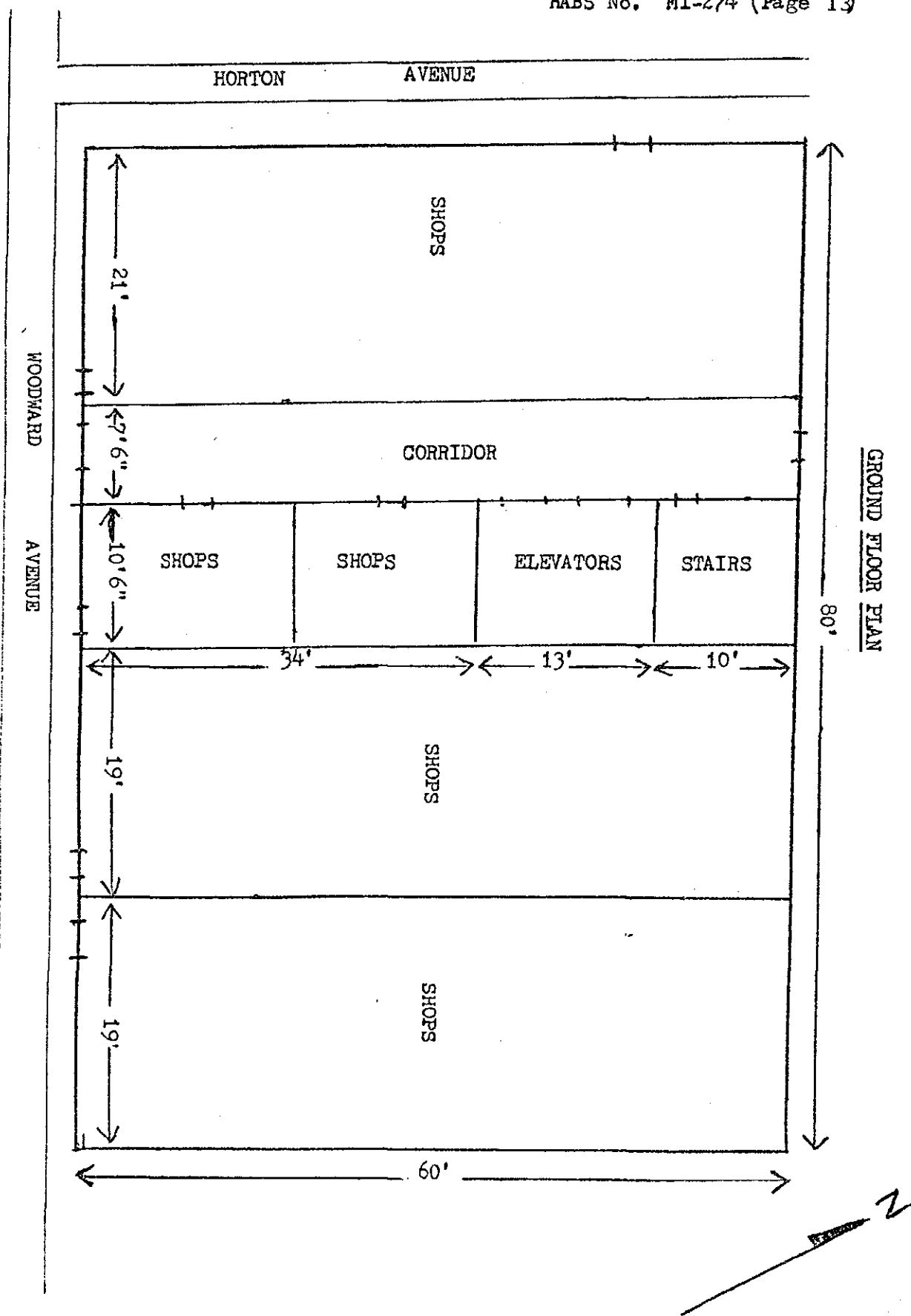
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BASSO BUILDING (Commercial Building)  
HABS No. MI-274 (Page 12)

Detroit, Michigan Quadrangle

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STANDARD FLOOR PLAN, SECOND FLOOR AND ABOVE

